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ABSTRACT

"Sharing the ownership of knowing" (a constructivist concept of motivation for literacy learning) is a dynamic classroom interaction in which a teacher's constructivist epistemological stance facilitates students' sense of their own construction of meaning and the integrity of their own thinking. Sharing the ownership of knowing was one of several interactive processes identified within the classroom of a constructivist teacher who was the subject of a qualitative study of student motivation. The study was initiated in a small academic community in a southern California school. As a participant-observer, the author of the study shared the thinking and experience of 31 students in a student-centered whole language fifth- and sixth-grade classroom. After analyzing the data, the participant-observer identified connections between self-expression, constructivism, and epistemological empowerment. The concept of epistemological empowerment is a dimension of students' motivation for literacy learning that may be present in social constructivist classrooms as the teacher shares the ownership of knowing. Those who are epistemologically empowered may become more engaged as literacy learners when they become aware of their own construction of meaning. (Nineteen references are attached.) (RS)

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Epistemological Empowerment: A Constructivist Concept of Motivation for Literacy Learning

This paper introduces a constructivist concept of motivation for literacy learning that I call *sharing the ownership of knowing*. Sharing the ownership of knowing is a dynamic of classroom interaction in which a teacher's constructivist epistemological stance facilitates students' sense of their own construction of meaning, and the integrity of their own thinking. Within such a context students may experience epistemological empowerment, and high levels of motivation for literacy learning. Sharing the ownership of knowing was one of several interactive processes identified within the classroom of a constructivist teacher in which I conducted a qualitative study of student motivation (See Author, 1991; Author, in press).1 Although this is a conceptual paper, rather than a research report, the concept can be most clearly articulated by describing my thinking processes during the research project from which the concept emerged.

The Relationship of Epistemology to Motivation

There is scant research focussed on the relationship between epistemological issues and motivation. This author (1991) and Blumenfeld (1992) have called for investigation of motivational issues in constructivist classrooms,

1 It must be acknowledged that there are many forms of constructivism, and that teachers who view the construction of knowledge in a narrowly Piagetian tradition may not necessarily have moved away from positivist doctrines, and may not share the ownership of knowing.

suggesting that there may be important relationships between goal theory and constructivist definitions of rich, interconnected and contextually relevant learning. Epistemological issues have been considered in relation to learning and motivation of college students and other adults. Perry (1970) examined epistemological development of predominantly male college students, concluding that students who moved from a view of knowledge as absolute, to a view of knowledge as mutable, relative to context and as subject to multiple perspectives, were able to affirm their own personal identities. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) studied women's epistemological perspectives, finding epistemological issues salient to women's motivation to learn:

> When truth is seen as a process of construction in which the knower participates, a passion for learning is unleashed....We observed a passion for knowing the self in the subjectivists and an excitement over the power of reason among procedural knowers, but we found that the opening of the mind *and* the heart to embrace the *world* was characteristic only of the women at the position of constructed knowledge (p. 140-141).

The women described by Belenky, et al. (1986) who experienced learning as a constructive process were epistemologically empowered. Exploring parallel possibilities in school contexts may offer clues for our understanding of motivation for literacy. Students whose

constructivist teachers share the ownership of knowing may experience passion for learning described by Belenky and colleagues.

Epistemological empowerment that takes place through sharing the ownership of knowing has potential to promote a profoundly different quality of motivation for literacy learning than is present in those not epistemologically empowered. I define epistemological empowerment as a sense of intellectual agency and ability to know that emerges from a strong sense of the integrity of one's own processes of constructing meaning. One who is epistemologically empowered feels that he or she is able to synthesize ideas, to make judgments, to develop opinions that deserve to be heard and to construct new knowledge. One who is epistemologically empowered (a) experiences learning as a process of construction, rather than as transmission; (b) does not view external authorities, such as a teacher, a book, or a set of data collected by someone else, as the only sources of knowledge or wisdom; (c) feels compelled to make sense of things; (d) respects the process of the construction of learning in others; and (e) understands that there are multiple viewpoints on any issue.

One who is <u>not</u> epistemologically empowered is one who (a) believes that the ability to know lies beyond the realm of his or her mind and looks to external knowledge sources; (b) thinks of knowledge in terms of facts, that have independent existence; (c) views teaching as transmission -

or as described by Freire (1971, p. 63), as the "banking model" of education in which the teacher deposits bits of learning in minds of students who store it.

Persons may experience empowerment or personal agency in other realms of human action without feeling epistemological empowerment. For example, they might perceive self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1987), personal causation (deCharms, 1984), or effectance (White, 1959) believing that they can make choices, set goals, and make things happen in their lives and yet not believe that they can *know*, or construct knowledge.

In the study described below, students' motivation for literacy learning was connected to several aspects of their own empowerment. One facet of this empowerment came about as the teacher and her students shared the ownership of knowing. I first began to have a glimpse of this concept through an interview with Paul, a sixth grader in the study:

> I think the only thing you can own is thoughts. Just thoughts. The way <u>you</u> say things. I think that's the only thing you can really own, and that's how you see the world, how you say the world is.

I kept mulling Paul's ideas: "Ownership of thoughts, and ownership of knowing. That's how you see the world, how you say the world is." How did Paul gain these concepts? He sounded like a constructivist philosopher. His comment laid the groundwork for my understanding of the concept of sharing the ownership of knowing. The following sections

will (a) provide a brief overview of the research focus, method, and context; (b) explain how the findings gave rise to the construct of epistemological empowerment; (c) describe interactive processes in this social constructivist classroom in which students experienced epistemological empowerment; and (d) summarize the conclusions of the paper.

Overview of the Research

Focus

Rather than addressing motivation for literacy learning as achievement motivation, I explored classroom environments in which students take personal ownership of their learning, discover what they care about, and, most importantly, connect who they are to what they do in school. The central research question was "What are students' perceptions of their own reasons or purposes for being or not being involved in learning activities?" Particular focus centered on students' experiences of their continuing impulse to learn (Author, 1991; Maehr, 1976).

Method

The baseline study was initiated in 1989 in a small academic community in Southern California in a school that I call "Willow" (Author, 1991; Author, In press). As participant observer, I shared the thinking and experience of thirty-one students in a student-centered whole language fifth- and sixth-grade classroom. The research has

subsequently evolved into a longitudinal study, currently spanning across the fourth academic year (Author, 1992).

During an eight-month period, I conducted a series of in-depth open-ended interviews with fourteen students, drawn from a representative balance of gender, achievement levels, and degrees of internal vs. external motivational orientation. Follow-up interviews provided verification, correction, clarification and elaboration. Fieldnotes and transcriptions were analyzed through the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The study involved 48 classroom visits, 95 observation hours, including 41 taped interviews.

Context

About 30% of the students in Willow were of African- Mexican- or Asian-American backgrounds. The classroom studied represented the school's diversity. Almost one-third of the students were eligible for special services through the resource teacher, ESL, or speech and language clinicians.

The teacher, "Susan Holmes," a leader in the whole language movement in her district, and in California, articulates her constructivist philosophy in this way.

> Ultimately, it's meaning that counts-- your meaning. The ultimate value in what you're doing is in the meaning of it which is really unrelated to the skills part...except the skills support the meaning. And they support being able to access it.

One of the students' comments reflects his understanding that accessing meaning was the a central goal in the classroom.

> Students at Willow are different. Instead of not wanting to read, they'll read. Instead of not wanting to write, they'll write. They want to write. One of the things I love in school is that we're trying to learn - not just get the right answer. That's really good. You want to get the right answer, but you still learn. You do better because learning is more important than getting the right answer.

In keeping with Susan's constructivist emphasis on making sense of things, she respected students' answers and interpretations. She encouraged students to admit freely, "I don't understand this yet," or, "I understand this differently." In making it safe for students to express themselves Susan had access to their thinking processes, and was able to respond to them and to scaffold or facilitate, their growing understandings (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

The Findings and How They Gave Rise to a Concept of Epistemological Empowerment

The motivating power of self-expression

Initial data analysis revealed that these students' continuing engagement in literacy learning was linked most often to activities that involved written, oral, and artistic self-expression. Writing was the favorite activity of eleven of the fourteen students. Other forms of self-

expression took place in writing workshop, activity-based projects, small group work, drawing, painting, sculpture, and plays. Students expressed themselves in "Big Discussions" that addressed important issues of the day. The following statement illustrates how one student saw his teacher's role:

> What she does is, she lets all of us talk....Most teachers say, 'if you have any ideas raise your hand.' Mrs. Holmes will start <u>us</u> to say stuff. She'll give us examples or give us ideas and then we build off of those ideas and say our ideas, final ideas. I don't think this is really a final idea because every time, you think about something, and then you think about something else for it, and then you think <u>that's</u> your thought but then there's something <u>else</u> about <u>that</u>. You can express yourself.

In light of the direct connections that students experienced between their motivation for literacy activities and self-expression, I probed more deeply to understand why it was that self-expression was so compelling for them. Students had described how they learned about themselves and their own feelings, of sharing their ideas about an exciting book, about the self-knowledge gained in writing a poem, about feeling "all clammed up" until painting a picture. I began to understand that as students engage in personal self-expression as part of literacy activities, learning processes are inherently connected to who they are, what

they care about, how they think. Not until later did I identify connections between self-expression, constructivism, and epistemological empowerment.

Honored Voice

The next question that I had to grapple with was: What was the quality or condition in this classroom that created this community of learners who were so excited about being involved in literacy learning through self-expression? I was seeking an overarching concept that could describe what was happening. The concept that eventually came to me was that of *Honored Voice*. I defined Honored Voice as a condition of deep responsiveness in the classroom environment to students' oral, written, and artistic self-expression. In a condition of Honored Voice the community of learners invited, listened and responded to, acted upon, and honored students' thoughts, feelings, interests, and needs.

There are many understandings of voice. The notions of voice used within this framework are informed by feminist philosophy (Belenky, et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1977; Lather, 1991) as well as critical theory (Apple, 1982; Friere, 1971). Voice comes from a deeper place than our throats. Voice comes from our hearts, from our minds, and from the inner places of knowing and feeling. If learners become connected to their literacy activities in ways that engage all of these aspects of themselves, they become motivated

for literacy learning. Their literacy processes become part of who they are.

Susan's deep responsiveness to her students' voices came out of her respect for the integrity of each learner's mind, of each learner's efforts to make sense of things, of each learner's processes of becoming. In honoring students' voices, she gave the students a sense of their own power to know. She shared the ownership of knowing.

The Having and Sharing of Wonderful Ideas

Even though I had found some ways to describe this responsive classroom, I had still not captured an important attribute of Susan's classroom. The missing piece was how to describe interactions of the classroom community of learners that was engaged in the shared construction of meaning. Consistent with her social constructivist goals, Susan had set out to create what she called a "rich broth of meaning" (Author, in press). Many students were experiencing learning as invention. They were involved in what Duckworth (1987) described as "the having of wonderful ideas." However, Duckworth's concept did not fully describe the *collaborative* of socially constructive aspects of this classroom. Borrowing from Duckworth, I have described these processes of constructing meaning as "the having *and sharing* of wonderful ideas." The next question became "How did these processes interact in Susan's class?"

Interactive Processes in Susan's Constructivist Classroom

Holistic understandings of students' views of the processes within classrooms have the potential to contribute to fuller understandings of student learning (Blumenfeld, 1992; Erickson & Schultz, 1992; Marshall and Weinstein, 1984). Within this classroom students experienced the having and sharing of wonderful ideas within the classroom condition of Honored Voice. The following is an example of these interactive processes: A student would construct ideas generated through her personally chosen book that related to issues about which she cared deeply (the *having* of wonderful ideas); then she might express her ideas and feelings about those issues in a small or large group discussion (the *sharing* of wonderful ideas). These ideas would be received in respectful, and thoughtful ways by the teacher and her classmates (the condition of Honored Voice). In having access to the students' ideas, her classmates and the teacher would be able to provide scaffolding for her thinking, facilitating construction of new ideas, providing affirmation and opportunity for voice, and sharing the ownership of knowing and thus furthering the student's sense of epistemological empowerment. For many students, this loop seemed to enhance their experiences of cognitive and affective connections between their learning activities and who they were; they believe that these cognitive and affective connections stimulated their motivation and

created greater interest in the content of their literacy learning.

Conclusions: The Relevance of Constructivism to Motivation

In the field of education, constructivist theory has been considered as primarily within the realms of learning and teaching (Anderson, 1977; Duckworth, 1987; Fosnot, 1989; Spivey, 1987) rather than as relevant to motivation. Based on the study described in this paper, there are indications from the that further exploration of the theoretical and practical relevance of social constructivism for motivation for literacy learning may be fruitful. Research is needed in other contexts, grade levels, and other cultural settings to examine whether and how constructivist teachers facilitate students' motivation for literacy learning.

To summarize, in this paper I have offered the concept of epistemological empowerment as a dimension of students' motivation for literacy learning that may be present in social constructivist classrooms as the teacher shares the ownership of knowing. I have suggested that a construct of motivation that relates to epistemological empowerment may be qualitatively different from motivational constructs of effectance motivation (White, 1959), self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1987) and personal causation (deCharms, 1984). Those who are epistemologically empowered may become more engaged as literacy learners when they become aware of their

own construction of meaning. They feel "I can think. I can know. I can have wonderful ideas."

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